

You're Not Who You Think You Are

A Case of Mistaken Identity

Quick, right now—who are you?

Are you your job title? Your role in your family? Your name? How about your body? Are those things all that you are, or just parts of you? If they're just parts of you, then who are you, really?

When pressed, most people will answer something like, "I'm just me!" But who is this me?

All of us have a sense of self, a feeling of being an individual person. This sense of self is often closely identified with our thoughts, with the voice in our head that is constantly narrating our lives. Like Descartes, who famously said, "I think, therefore I am," we end up identifying as the thinker of our thoughts.

But both Buddhist philosophy and modern neuroscience call this identification into question. From this perspective, not only are we not our thoughts (or the thinkers of our thoughts), but identifying with our thoughts is actually the source of a tremendous amount of suffering. When we disentangle our awareness from our internal monologues, we can be lighter, freer, and more capable of responding to life.

One of the central tenets of Buddhist philosophy is *anattā*, or non-self. While non-self has been the subject of endless debate and lengthy philosophical treatises, in a nutshell, it says that there is no such thing as a permanent, unchanging, separate self. In Buddhism, the belief in such a self is also considered a key ingredient in the mental suffering we all experience, and it's one of the first "fetters" that falls away when a person experiences awakening.

While the Buddha articulated these insights over 2500 years ago, modern neuroscience seems to be backing him up. To date, researchers have been unable to find any single part of the brain that corresponds to the self. As neuroscientist Sam Harris put it, "There's no place in the brain for your ego to be hiding."

Instead, the sense of self seems to correlate with the activity of a whole network of brain regions, known as the Default Mode Network, or DMN.

In addition to the sense of self, the DMN is associated with mind-wandering, daydreaming, thinking about ourselves, thinking about others, remembering the past, and planning the future. In other words, it's active not when we're in the present moment, but when we're lost in thought.

The Default Mode Network and the sense of self must have evolved for a reason. As humans, we are social animals, and it may be that having a self-concept allows us to think through our complex relationships with other people and our environment in a way that helps us survive and reproduce successfully.

The problem is, we mistake the map for the territory. The sense of self created by the activity of the DMN is more like a hologram than a real thing. It's a representation that serves a purpose, but we end up believing in the representation, like children seeing a magic trick at a birthday party and believing it's for real.

And when we believe that the self is real, we spend a lot of time worrying about ourselves. *Am I good enough? What do they think of me? Do I look fat in these jeans? I can't believe I said that. I'm so stupid. How many likes did I get on that post? Will anyone ever love me? I'm afraid to die.*

Our self-focused thoughts perpetuate our suffering.

But if we're not our thoughts, or the apparent thinkers of our thoughts, then who or what are we?

One traditional answer is that we are the awareness in which our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories, and other experiences take place.

You may be able to get a sense of this awareness right now by asking yourself, "What is the awareness that is reading these words? What is the awareness that is looking out through these eyes?" Don't try to answer these questions with more words. Just notice the quiet awareness that is already there.

By engaging in meditation or self-inquiry practices like these, it's possible to disentangle awareness from thinking, from the constant stream of content we usually take ourselves to be. But if you struggled with this exercise, don't worry—for most people, it takes practice.

The good news is, meditation is proven to reduce activity in the Default Mode Network, as well as reducing stress and symptoms of anxiety and depression. For some meditators, this comes with a subjective experience of seeing through the illusion of the self.

When we unhook ourselves from our identification with thought and are simply present as awareness, our minds are more quiet, peaceful, even joyful. We feel free. And crucially, we're better able to respond to what's happening right now. We can be more present with others. We can even be more creative.

As meditation teacher Ken McLeod put it, "Freedom from identity is what allows and enables us to be truly human—to be an ongoing response to the challenges, demands, and needs of life."

In our hearts, I believe most of us want that—to be more open, free, and available for others. But in order to become the kind of people we most deeply want to be, we may have to let go of our identification with who we thought we were.